

# **Literacy, Intellectual Property, and the Status Quo**

**Andrea A. Lunsford**

*Professor of English, Ohio State University*

*Keynote speech presented at the Center for  
Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing 1991 Conference  
"Politics and Literacy: Social Constructions of  
Writing in Academic Communities "*

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## Preface

On February 7 and 8, 1991, the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing held its second annual colloquium, "Politics and Literacy: Social Constructions of Writing within Academic Communities." The colloquium focused on issues of critical literacy, diversity and writing, and the politics of assessment. The Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing invited Andrea Lunsford, Professor of English and Vice Chair for Rhetoric and Composition at Ohio State University, to lead a workshop for faculty and to deliver the keynote address published here.

A leading figure in the fields of rhetoric and composition, Andrea Lunsford is coauthor of *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: The Theory and Practice of Collaborative Writing; The Right to Literacy; Democracy Through Language; Essays on Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse; The St. Martin's Handbook; Four Worlds of Writing*; and numerous articles. Professor Lunsford's keynote address, *Literacy, Intellectual Property, and the Status Quo*, provides a context for the entire field of composition by examining the various scenes for writing which have historically operated in the classroom, and which still influence writing pedagogy today.

The colloquium and the publication of Professor Lunsford's speech continue the Center's commitment to improving undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. Along with colloquia, conferences, publications, and other outreach activities, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- characteristics of writing across the University's Curriculum;
- status reports on students' writing ability and the University;

- the connections between writing and learning in all fields;
- the characteristics of writing beyond the academy;
- the effects of ethnicity, race, class, and gender on writing; and
- curricular reform through writing-intensive instruction.

We are pleased to present Professor Lunsford's keynote address as part of the ongoing discussion about the politics of teaching writing. One of the goals of all Center publications is to encourage conversations about writing; we invite you to contact the Center about this publication or other Center publications and activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor  
Kim Donehower, Editor  
January 1996

## **Literacy, Intellectual Property, and the Status Quo: Scenes for Writing in the Academy**

*I'd like to dedicate these remarks to students everywhere and particularly to students from the University of Minnesota and from Ohio State who today find themselves in the Persian Gulf.*

To speak of scene is immediately to invoke *context*, and thus I wish to begin by contextualizing, setting the scene, for my remarks today. Though these remarks will focus on different scenes for writing in our universities, they must necessarily grow out of my own scene, one that is very much characterized by blurred borders and boundaries and sometimes by conflicting goals. As a professor in a fairly traditional English department, I hold a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in English. Yet my dissertation focused on composition, I took one of my four qualifying examinations on composition and rhetoric (the others in old and middle English language and literature, eighteenth century, and American literature), and my scholarly work attempts to be informed not only by my understanding of literature (its history and theory) but by theories of composition, rhetoric, and learning; by the psychology of knowing, applied linguistics, and to a much smaller extent, by the history of philosophy. My own scene is also very much influenced by my teaching experience, in every grade from eight through graduate school, at two-year colleges, at three universities—one of them in Canada—and by my personal experience in the profession. In particular, this professional scene has been characterized by an odd disjunction between my construction of what it means to be a scholar/researcher/writer in a large university English department, to gain tenure and promotion, and what it means to be a *teacher* of writing in a university. Though I have



not always been conscious of this disjunction, it certainly has affected my progress both as a scholar and as a teacher.

This blurring of borders and disciplines and academic goals allows me, perhaps perversely, to feel relatively comfortable in a department of English, and moreover, to resonate to three very different constructions or scenes of writing informing such departments.

The three traditions of which I speak can be traced in various ways and told by way of varying stories, but today I'd like to begin by noting several major figures who epitomize for me these differing approaches. One construction of writing I would trace to Hugh Blair and William Aytoun, of Edinburgh and Glasgow, who professed strong humanist ideals associated with high or "great" literature and whose lectures consistently urged students to achieve access to culture through assimilation, through absorption of such literature. (Both warned, however, against trying to "do" literature oneself; rather one should learn to appreciate and enjoy great literature and hence enact a self worthy of entering the educated group.) The scene for writing in such a tradition was one of assimilating great texts, of displaying one's culture, of matching oneself, insofar as possible, to the ideals represented in these texts. Blair's and Aytoun's lectures and the tradition they embody clearly had an affect on North American university education, and these same lectures—or very nearly the same—are currently being delivered by Don Hirsch and others who espouse a certain brand of cultural literacy as a means of entry into the ranks of educated—and hence affluent—American society. Theirs, in fact, is the tradition that prevailed in nineteenth-century elite private schools, and this tradition provides one powerful scene for writing in our universities today, one in which writing is

constructed as an acolyte to the literary texts of “great men.” The student’s task is to absorb the ideas produced by these great men and to use writing to help in this assimilation.

It is a short step from the construction of writer as acolyte to that of writing as key to the individual soul. In this tradition, I think of Emerson’s essays on eloquence and of other Transcendentalist teachers, whose influence has profoundly affected another construction of writing in the academy today, and has created for writing yet another scene. This construction posits writing as a means not so much of getting in touch with or absorbing the great ideas of western literature but of getting in touch with some private, inner truth. These Emersonian lectures, which construct writing as a way of knowing the inner self, are currently being delivered by a group of teachers often referred to as “expressionists”—scholars like Don Murray, Ken Macrorie, and William Coles, who view knowledge as residing within, and writing as a search for what is within and a way to reveal what is within to another. Very closely related in my mind to this view of writing is that held by Peter Elbow and Ken Bruffee, who are often thought of as “transactionists” or even “social constructionists” because of their focus on peer groups. Certainly Elbow and Bruffee ostensibly stress peer response groups and the social nature of learning in composition. Yet when it comes to writing itself, the major spokespersons for their point of view hold to the same epistemology characteristic of Murray, Macrorie, and Coles: the writer eventually writes alone, searching for a way to represent a unique inner self in writing. Truth and knowledge are located in the individual’s private apprehension of a larger world and are personal, solitary, and sacred. This construction of writing is informed by a deep-seated belief in individual genius and radical American

individualism, in the Romantic sense of the term, a belief that characterizes the scene of writing in many universities today. Knowledge is something individually derived and held, and writing is a means of tapping this knowledge and sharing it with another.

Yet a third scene for writing in the academy today can be traced not to Blair and the writing acolytes or to Emerson and the key to the inner self, but to George Campbell and Alexander Bain of the Edinburgh Philosophical Society and the University of Aberdeen. Campbell's work in rhetoric and the art of preaching shifted attention from works of literature or the interior truths of individual souls to the mental processes through which texts are produced and received; he was interested in the psychology of reading and writing. Bain carried Campbell's interest much further, developing a two-volume treatise relating writing and reading to various mental categories and pursuing the psychological elements of these literate acts. Bain's work aimed at the pragmatic, at how to develop skills that would allow one to achieve access through powerful deploying of such skills, and at how the individual mind could be trained to achieve social and economic and educational successes. These lectures and lessons are, at their most trivial, currently being delivered by educationists preaching acontextual "critical thinking" skills and drills, by the likes of Madeline Hunter, and by the nation's test and assessment mongers. The reductionist version of this pragmatic gesture in higher education is characteristic not of the elite British schools or the early American colleges but of the land grant schools, and, more recently, of some two-year colleges. But at the less trivial, these lectures are linked to the work of compositionists interested in cognition, who wish to construct writing as a reflection or extension of thinking and who view knowledge not as a shrine to be worshipped at or as a set of private truths, but as a great storehouse to be

investigated. Those who construct writing in this way include a number of major figures in our field today—Linda Flower, Steve Witte, Charles Cooper, and many, many others. Knowledge can be tapped through mental acts and thus through the mental work of writing. The teacher’s job is to teach strategies that will allow students to deploy their mental capacities and their writing toward the end of investigating the great storehouse of knowledge.

I’ve sketched these three constructions or scenes of writing so starkly, of course, in order to challenge or critique them. Yet there’s something useful, I would argue, in looking at our current situation in regard to questions of literacy, selfhood, and intellectual property in just such an oversimplified way, for it allows us to bring into focus some of the elements these three constructions of writing have in common.

The most obvious commonality among these three traditions may well be that they are all essentially masculinist. The first tradition—of Blair and Hirsch—is even known as the “great man and his works” tradition, and the third—that of Campbell, Bain, and many contemporary cognitivists—uses as its norm a highly rational or neo-Aristotelian mental model which is ultimately masculine. Any cognitive strategies which deviate from this masculinist model are not just different but deficient.

The other tradition or construction of writing—the Emersonian or Colesian—is often perceived to be based on cooperative or even feminist principles. I beg, however, to disagree. Even a cursory look at the work of Coles, Murray, or Elbow, for instance, will reveal that they construct writing and build their scenes for writing entirely on firsthand personal experiences. Their writings—charming as they are—celebrate the individual

voice and a truth that resides, independently and apart from others, within the self. And these voices are overwhelmingly masculinist, as are their metaphors for writing.

Murray refers, for instance, to writing as boxing, to revising as “counterpunching,” and to writing well as “knowing what the *masters* know” (*A Writer Teaches Writing*; 103 men, 9 women quoted). According to Murray, a writer “wrestles” with inner “demons,” while in Elbow’s work, writing is “power” and “mastery”—writing is full of violent punches and jabs—it is like “wrestling with a steer” or like waging a fierce battle. Elbow refers to the writer’s “real voice” as a “gun” and speaks of the constant tension between a “strong voice” and “limpid fluency.”

A second obvious commonality in these three constructions of writing is their view of writing as a form of intellectual property and their unquestioning assumption of originary authorship and individual selfhood. Each of these constructions posits an individual writer/reader, a unified self that can commune with those individuals who created “great” literature, that can conduct Macrorian “I-searches,” or can explore its own unique declarative and procedural cognitive knowledge. In the classroom—in any of the classrooms based on these constructions—the student self has been seen as autonomous, engaging in an aggressively competitive process of representing that autonomous self in writing or of meeting another autonomous self in reading. That is to say that these three major pedagogies, our major scenes for writing throughout our history, construct the writer as radically individual, construct knowledge as singularly derived and held as the property of that individual intellect, and construct writing as individually produced intellectual property.

I wish to argue that these scenes of writing have yet another commonality, in addition to their masculinist assumptions and view of selfhood and intellectual property, in that each aims at an unproblematised assimilation into some status quo, whether it is the elitism of the private school tradition (writing is a means of imbibing the lessons of the masters and thus a means of merging with polite society), the iconoclasm and radical individualism of the transcendental tradition (the Murray/Elbow position, with writing as a key to inner truth and thus a means of unifying the self), or the pragmatism of the land-grant tradition (the cognitivist tradition, with writing as a means to economic and political power and hence a way of joining a capitalist society).

The scene of writing I want to invoke now is so contentious today precisely because it challenges each of these commonalities—it challenges the notion of a unified (and usually masculine) self holding static intellectual property, and it challenges the construction of writing as a means of reproducing some status quo, whether that status quo is cultural, psychological, or economic.

This scene of writing today challenges the notion of a unified self holding intellectual property in a number of compelling ways. Poststructuralist theorists of many differing stripes have argued that writing is far from simple, referential, or coherent and that the self is far from unified or static, that writing and the self have been constructed in such a way for political and ideological reasons that may well no longer hold. Feminist theory also has helped us look at difference rather than sameness or homogeneity and to see the diversity within as well as outside of the “self.” Most important, the feminist critique has challenged the masculinist models animating writing pedagogy, models which reify the individual learner as masculine. The electronic revolution is, of course,

also forcing us to recognize the constructed nature of intellectual property, as anyone can appropriate “on-line” language and texts appear regularly without attribution.

Some in composition studies have also begun to challenge the unexamined connections between writing, gender, selfhood, and intellectual property by turning to collaboration and modes of cooperative authorship and by studying the ways in which selves as well as texts are socially constructed.

In the face of such challenges, why do the major academic pedagogies continue to reflect the aims I’ve described: reifying an individual, solitary, masculine knower and, ironically, bringing that individual into assimilation with some economic, cultural, or psychological status quo? They do so because, I think, what is at stake is nothing less than the entire intellectual capital of the university: the entire testing and grading system; the entire means of admissions, placement, and class ranking; the entire system of tenure, promotion and seniority; in short, the entire academic hierarchy. To elaborate only on the first of these, it isn’t difficult to see that the entire testing/assessment/grading engine in North America runs on the energy of individual, originary knowledge and intellectual property traded for grades—that individuals may be tested on such intellectual property in controlled and decontextualized conditions. This drive toward hierarchy, toward the kind of sameness, homogeneity or “norming” that can be measured, tested, and individually ranked and compared, is everywhere endemic in the academy.

I believe we must begin to question this hierarchical model for the academy, that we must reexamine the ways we have constructed writing—as the means of staking claim to intellectual property rights and as means of assimilating into some status quo. I believe we may profit from constructing writing not as a way to commune with great literary

texts, or as a key to finding unique solitary selves and voices, or as a series of mental skills or strategies to be mastered, but as the very way we socially constitute, know, and transform our world. As such, writing and the field of composition studies must evoke a scene not of radical individualism, not of assimilation, but of social construction and transformation.

Doing so demands that those interested in composition studies, in constructing alternative scenes for writing, make certain intellectual moves. First is to explore collaboration/cooperation as principles, to construct a writing scene that is not a Hirschean shrine, an Elbowian soul search, or a Flower and Hayes storehouse, but a conversational grouping, a Burkean parlor or even a “contact zone.” Such a notion of collaboration might well take as its motto Hannah Arendt’s simple but compelling statement: “For excellence, the presence of others is always required.” Such a concept of collaboration would place control, power, and authority not in the teacher or tester, not in the literary author, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group. Composition studies informed by this principle would engage students not only in solving problems set by teachers or testers or programmers, but in identifying problems for themselves; not only in working in groups but in monitoring, evaluating, and building a theory of how groups work; not only in understanding and valuing collaboration but in confronting squarely the issues of power and control that meaningful collaboration inevitably raises; not only in reaching consensus or answering questions but in valuing dissensus and difference and open-ended inquiry.

A scene for writing informed by a theory of knowledge as socially constructed, of power and control as constantly negotiated and shared, of difference as celebrated rather

than erased, and of collaboration as a first principle—that's quite a challenge. Such a concept challenges our ways of organizing our classrooms, of training our teachers, of creating tests and technologies: it certainly challenges our major pedagogies, all of which posit a solitary writer intent on amassing individually-held intellectual property. More important, however, such a concept presents a challenge to the institution of higher education, an institution that, as I've indicated, insists on rigidly controlled individual performance, on evaluation as punishment, on isolation, on debilitating hierarchies, on the kinds of values that recognize and reward only individually-held knowledge and intellectual “property.”

So a thorough exploration of collaboration—yes. But a second intellectual move composition studies must make in constructing a new scene for writing is to look well beyond its own borders and to challenge divisions between disciplines, between genres, and between media. Thus scholars of composition should be able to draw on anthropology, linguistics, psychology, philosophy, literary theory, neurobiology, or other disciplines in studying the creation and dissemination of texts. Of course, the blurring of disciplinary boundaries raises a number of difficulties for graduate students and scholars in the field. How can any one person enter the discourses of multiple fields? How viable (and valid) is the use of one discipline’s methodology transferred to another field? While the challenges of transdisciplinary work loom large (see, e.g. Stanley Fish, “*Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard To Do*”), the questions asked by scholars in composition studies and a focus on collaboration demand a constant pushing against disciplinary barriers, a consistent invitation to other fields to add insights and help build satisfactory answers to our questions.

The kind of scene for writing I'm looking for means that composition studies must also continue to challenge traditional generic boundaries, particularly those between "fiction" and "nonfiction" and "literary" and "nonliterary." Arguing that all written texts demand interpretation and are thus potentially of interest to the scholar of writing, compositionists have pushed for viewing student writing not as "other" or inferior but as worthy of rigorous study (Miller).

Closely related to genre are the media through which genres are realized, and here once again any new scene for writing must address the ways in which divisions between speaking, writing, reading, and listening no longer hold. Most obvious, perhaps, is the effect of television, video, and electronic media. On television, for example, a prime minister addresses the nation orally but works from a written text which is "read" from a monitor and "read" as well by listeners at home who may be recording, taping or transcribing. Like the blurring between disciplines and between genres, the blurring between and among the media of communication, the "collaboration" of reading, speaking, and writing, offers exciting possibilities for future research. Donna Haraway argues that the most important blurrings are between people and machines and between the artificial and natural world.

Still another move a renovated composition studies must make is to go beyond the classroom or the academy to study the use of writing in the home, in the community, in the workplace—to trace the use of language arts in both private and public spheres. As a field, composition studies seems intent on such collaborations, on pressing beyond campus boundaries, breaking down the walls of the "ivory tower," bridging the surrounding moat, and establishing conversation in the public square. Of the many works

that illustrate this move in composition studies, we might best look to Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, a demonstration of how schooling can be connected to community acts, and to essays in Modern Language Association's *The Right to Literacy* that focus on scenes of language learning outside the academy.

The moves I have described characterize, I believe, a scene for writing in a postmodern composition studies. A thorough exploration of cooperation and collaboration as the basis of our conception of intellectual property, challenging the status quo; a focus on the composed quality of all experience, of all texts; a pushing against disciplinary, generic, and media boundaries; a move to connect the academy to other forums in the private and public space—these are all moves beyond the centrality of a unified self or subject, all voyages outward, all inviting, I believe, a broad definition of *literacy* or *literacies* as the business we must be about. At the very nexus of composition's terministic scene (see Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*), literacy encompasses highly theoretical concerns over the relationships among thought, language, and action, historical concerns over the organization and development of literacy, and pragmatic concerns over how literate behaviors are nurtured and practiced. The study of literacy, like the new scene for writing, constantly moves outward, inevitably shading theory into pedagogy, research into practice, cutting across lines of class, age, race, gender, and ability, reaching out to all. But for these very reasons, the postmodern study of literacy and composition studies must inevitably raise complex political and ethical questions: How will literacy be defined and measured? Who will have access to full and multiple literacies? Who will be denied? What are the responsibilities of literacy? Who is responsible for literacy?

These are questions that are being answered in radically different ways by different elements in our society, from the schoolhouse and the White House to the prison house. As an example from one schoolhouse, consider this scene: a large public institution establishes selective admissions based on ACT scores. (The ACT calls for no writing.) Its first-year students take one required composition course or, in some cases, a term of noncredit course work in a Writing Workshop or Writing Center before being admitted to the one required course. These courses, which constitute the “service” component of the English department, are taught by part-time instructors and graduate students, many of whom are new to the discipline and to the classroom. At the end of one year, roughly forty per cent of the first-year students are gone; the percentage for minority students is even higher. The part-time instructors rotate into similar jobs at nearby institutions, the graduate student teaching assistants continue their studies, prepare to write theses and dissertations on traditional literacy topics in the Hirschean “man and his works tradition,” and pick up whatever tips they can about how to teach the next round of first-year students. Meanwhile, the students who survive sign up for subsequent courses in which they will be expected, on the basis of no further instruction and very little practice, to perform as skilled writers and readers and to amass their own privately-held intellectual property.

Or consider another schoolhouse scene, one not altogether unlike the preceding one. At a mainline university, serving students from across the country, one administrator writes: “It is not the role of this university to teach composition; that is the responsibility of the student. If students cannot write, they should not be at this university. Alas, even though we attract la crème de la crème, many do not measure up.”

These are troubling scenes for writing—ones that are still far too familiar to too many of us. They are troubling precisely because of the answers they implicitly give to the questions I have raised concerning literacy, intellectual property, and the status quo. These scenes, after all, define literacy reductively, as a set of narrowly defined skills that can be taught by almost anyone in the most inhospitable of situations and learned by rote, a body of static information to be swallowed like medicine. This reductive definition acts as an exclusionary gate keeper. It also assigns responsibility to a marginalized group, thus seriously undercutting the significance of the task at hand, which I would argue is nothing less than the creation of worlds, the writing of a new university into existence.

I want to suggest that these schoolhouse scenes for writing implicitly hold to two of the traditions I've described: The school with the one-quarter course taught by untrained TAs and part-timers constructs writing as skills and drills, as discrete sets of skills in the trivialized cognitivist mode, while the school that eschews all responsibility for writing holds implicitly to the Hirschean position, the notion that what students need is content, the content of great literature and the arts. I could offer another schoolhouse scene to evoke the Emersonian or Elbowian construction of writing—but I'll let you imagine that one for yourselves.

My evocation of a postmodern composition studies suggests, I hope, that other schoolhouse scenes are possible. In such alternative scenes, writing becomes the means of focusing on the questions I have raised regarding literacy and intellectual property, the means of exploring issues that will be raised by joining, rejecting, or changing the status quo. Writing becomes the social means for exploring questions about writers, readers,

texts, and contexts, a way not of assimilating into a university but of writing the university into being.

It is possible to argue that our institutions are so firmly committed to hierarchy, to isolation, and to an ideal of the solitary self that no such alternative scenes for writing are possible. Some days I make this argument myself. But let me be a bit more optimistic today and describe very briefly an alternative scene for writing my colleagues and I are trying to construct. We've begun with what some would call a "remedial" English course—basic writing, a course that used to be a paragraph levels skills course. Students take up one central question: Who is the university for? They explore this question and work together toward formulating answers to it by working through three core texts: E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Students work together, workshop-style, to produce oral and written summaries of these texts, to write reviews of them, to compare their lines of argument, to explore their various uses of metaphor, and eventually to articulate their own positions on our guiding question, one which asks who has a right to literacy as well as what literacy is—one which raises questions about traditional notions of intellectual property and about the educational status quo. I was in one of these classes yesterday where they were reading *Lives on the Boundary* and planning ethnographic research projects aimed at exploring issues that Mike Rose's book raises. Much of the writing the students do is collaborative, their texts communal, and evaluation is based on a range of selves and on communal efforts rather than on radically individual efforts.

You probably know of other alternative scenes for writing and I don't mean to belabor my own example. I just want to note that it doesn't follow any of the three

models. I believe it is imperative, however, that we create such alternatives—that we resist the scenes of writer as acolyte to “great Western literature,” of writing as mastery of discrete skills, or as a key to a unique but ultimately isolated self—in favor of scenes for writing which engage students in examining these very constructions of writing; in exploring our still largely masculinist writing pedagogies; in asking whose intellectual property is valued, whose is not, and how intellectual property gets defined and used; in resisting easy or passive assimilation into any cultural, economic, or psychological status quo. If we can enact such scenes, our classrooms will be more like the conversational groupings, the Burkean parlors, and the contact zones I earlier evoked. They will be centers that take as their goal the rigorous interrogation of any status quo and that will produce very different kinds and forms of intellectual property, intellectual property I’d like, finally, to call literacy.

Creating such scenes for writing, allowing for and nurturing the literacies such scenes will enable is in my mind—to appropriate a phrase used a number of times last week by President Bush—the hard work of freedom. It is hard work, and it is work we can, and we will, do.

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